

Skipper Recalls River Days

Reprinted by permission from the White Pass Container Route News (April 1972)

Editor's note: Capt. Bill Bromley of Victoria brushed dust from his old uniform and took command of the White Pass stern-wheeler "Klondike" for a few hours during the Arctic Winter Games in Whitehorse in early March.

The ship was recommissioned for one day during which time Gov.-Gen. Roland Michener officially opened the Games from her deck.

Capt. Bromley was flown to Whitehorse for the occasion as a guest of the White Pass, to again tread the decks of his old command, and to watch the Yukon Steam Navigation herself again flying from her mast after 17 years on the beach.

"You were the most important person in the world, standing there in the wheel-house as the first boat of the season sidled into her berth at Dawson City, with all the townspeople waving and cheering."

"The community likely had used up its last box of fresh fruit, its last sack of vegetables. Groceries might be running short. And there was a need for new supplies of medicines."

"The school children were given a holiday to see the first boat of the season coming down-river; all the townsfolk turned up at the river bank."

This is how Capt. Bill Bromley described the highlight day of the year for masters and crew sailing the White Pass riverboats before the days of all-season highways and scheduled airline services.

Capt. Bill Bromley, now retired to his native Victoria, can look back over a span of 31 years on the Yukon River—from the days when he was second mate on the old "Canadian" to the days when he brought the "Klondike" back to Whitehorse for the last time, to have her beached on the river-bank, replaced by truck and bus in a fast-changing world which puts convenience and economic factors ahead of sentiment.

While the arrival of the first boat of the season was a happy event for the people of Dawson, the sailing of the last ship of the season was an occasion marked with sadness.

You knew, always, when you left that some of the friends you had made over the years would be dead by the time you came back down-river in the spring, blasting your whistle to mark the awakening of a new year. And you left, in the fall, knowing that the community was cut off from the rest of the world, save for the bush pilots who bumped in through air pockets in aircraft fastened together with baling wire to complete a mercy flight.

Those were big events on the river, days that Capt. Bromley always will remember. But the biggest thrill of his career on the river was the day he had Prince Philip aboard as a passenger for a five-hour sight-seeing trip, a few months before "Klondike's" engines were silenced forever.



Captain William Bromley. Photo courtesy of The Whitehorse Star

Prince Philip was the most famous passenger ever carried in Capt. Bromley's ship, but there were others, too: the Lord Mayor of London and Viscount Alexander.

"Even back in 1924, most of our passengers were tourists," recalls Capt. Bromley. They would be mostly women. There were a lot of school teachers during the vacation months. And most of the passengers were Americans."

The "Klondike" was a happy ship; there would be dances every night after the dining room waiters had cleared away the heavy silver coffee pots and silver cream jugs, the dinnerware and ornate flatware.

Going down river to Dawson was generally just a one-nighter, with the trip taking only 36 hours, but fighting the currents on the return trip took four days. Rarely, a boat would get hung up on a sandbar for a few hours; and, sometimes, there was a gale-blowing down Lake Labarge buffeting the boat so that the engineers kept a weather-eye cocked on the rigid stem pipes which were in danger of spilling as the shallow-draft vessel bobbed about.

The White Pass years were good years for Capt. Bromley. He had known coastal waters before he came North, and he now knows there's a greater challenge in piloting on the river, trying to "read" the river, watching for shifting sandbanks.

Victoria-born Capt. Bill Bromley first went to sea at the age of 16 in a whaling boat stationed at Naden Harbour in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Later, he joined a government hydrographic vessel, the "Lilloet", and then went into towboating.

But it was riverboats that became his first love.

"I guess I was made for it," he says. "In my early days on the river I used to spend my off-duty hours on the bridge studying the river, to get to know where the sandbanks were."

There was no chart-reading on that job. In some parts of the river, the shoals changed with the years.

But despite the shifting shoals, there were few groundings.

"Perhaps five or six during the 19 years I was serving in the "Klondike", he recalls.

During the summer months, the river boats were kept on the move, back and forth continuously. There was a lot of cargo and passengers to move, and spending time on a sandbar in the middle of nowhere, even on a hot summer day, wasn't what the job called for.

In winter, the crews left the Yukon, leaving their boat in the hands of the shipyard men to haul up on to the river bank until the ice broke up in the spring, and the boat was again floated, the silverware was polished, the decks repainted, and the great latticework of paddles chucked once again, carrying the first mail, the first cargo, the first passengers down river to Dawson City and way points.

Craigflower Manor

Published quarterly in English and French, B.C. was officially opened March 9, 1972 by Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and W. D. Black, Provincial Secretary of British Columbia.

The rehabilitation of the historic structure is a joint venture of the federal and provincial governments. Acquisition and restoration costs were shared by the two governments, and the province is responsible for ongoing operation and maintenance.

Craigflower Manor commemorates the transition from fur trade to settlement on the northwest coast. It was originally the focus of Craigflower Farm, one of four farms on Vancouver Island operated by the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, a subsidiary of the Hudson's Bay Company.

1 Expertly restored and furnished to the 1850-63 period, Craigflower Manor's first occupant was Kenneth McKenzie, overseer of the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. Some of the household possessions brought from Great Britain by the McKenzie family remain in the house which is open to the public year-round.

2 The 118-year-old Craigflower Manor is one of the finest examples of early domestic architecture. Built almost entirely of native materials in a simple colonial style, the manor house embodies all the easy grace and elegance of rural living a century ago.



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Boats with Bustles

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Preparing to winch through Five Finger Rapid, Yukon River, Y.T. The seaman at left front reaches to locate the wire to be used in the winch through the easterly (left-hand) channel. The upright spar (downright) at front and centre of the barge is a front-sight for the wheelhouse enabling the pilot to navigate accurately the narrow channels of which Five Finger Rapid is typical. Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

National Historic Parks News

Government Publications

Canada can boast waterfront property on three oceans and a magnificent seaway system. In addition, a remarkable maze of inland rivers contribute to making Canada essentially, a maritime nation. Although most of the ships that docked at her ports-of-call have been of the deep-sea variety; shallow-draught, fresh-water vessels have played a major role in the development of Canadian sovereignty.

Boats opened the huge stretches of the Interior hinterland and contributed to the development and cohesion of Canada as a nation. Canoes, batteau and York boat carried the fur-trade from the Canadian Shield to the Rockies and opened the prairies to settlement. Throughout the Interior of British Columbia and the Yukon and Northwest Territories, the forerunner to commercial transportation and communication was the stern-wheeled paddle-steamer.

Two stern-wheelers—S.S. Keno at Dawson and S.S. Klondike at Whitehorse—are the property of the National Historic Sites Service and plans are well underway to restore them to their original condition of 1930 and 1937 respectively.

The restoration of boats is a relatively new move for the National Historic Sites Service. Only in the last twelve years have floating structures been considered of historic importance and been counted along with the more than 600 major and minor

historic sites that plot the advent of Canadian history from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island.

Marine restoration since 1960 includes the raising and stabilizing of a sunken gunboat near Malorytown, Ontario and the preservation of a York boat (a typically Canadian craft used on inland waterways) presently on display at Lower Fort Garry in Manitoba. In centennial year, a major project was the reconstruction of *Le Grand Harminé*—Jacques Cartier's flagship of 1535, now part of the Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Park. By the latter part of 1974, the restoration of the *St. Roch*—historic conqueror of the Northwest Passage, will be complete. S.S. Keno and S.S. Klondike will form part of the extensive Klondike Goldrush International Historic Park—symbolizing the important role the stern-wheeler has played in the development of the north. The paddle-wheeled riverboat is a typically North American vessel. Appearing on the Mississippi River about 1817 where they began their legendary association with gold, gambling and gals. They followed the gold rush to California and finally found their way to the Klondike towards the end of the 18th century.

The Mississippi riverboats had their paddlewheels on the side, amidships—the boats that serviced the Yukon had their wheels in the rear. The modifications were





made because of the nature of the northern rivers. Side-wheeled vessels were too wide to navigate the narrow channels that are characteristic of northern rivers, the width necessitated docking facilities and the exposed wheels often became clogged and damaged by river debris. On the other hand, the sternwheeler's paddle was protected by the hull of the boat from damage by debris and she could pull into a river bank, discharge passengers and take on cargo without the need of a dock – this advantage also enabled her to make stops even where no landing stage existed, quite convenient in an area where small settlements, strung along the rivers depended upon the river-boat as a lifeline to the outside.

Side- or stern-wheeled, the riverboats were unique in two respects. Flat-bottomed and with a shallow draught, they could float duck-like on water and the paddle wheel required mere inches of water to provide thrust. Enthusiasts claim that in an emergency they have been known to shuttle through wet sand.

Transportation over the great distances of the Yukon and Northwest Territories has always been a problem. There are thousands of miles of navigable water in the Yukon River alone. Before the mid-1800's Indians, fur traders and prospectors ventured into northern waters by batteau and canoe. These small boats were able to travel the swift current and narrow bends of the rivers flowing north into the Arctic Ocean but were not adequate to supply the flourishing posts of Fort Selkirk and Fort Yukon, on a large, commercial scale. So it was left to the sternwheeler to become the major link between isolated trading posts in the Yukon during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The first sternwheeler to appear in northern waters was the *Wilder* in 1866. Soon joined by the Yukon, the two boats made the passage from St. Michaels in Alaska "Up South" the Yukon River as the Fort Selkirk (midway between Whitehorse and Dawson).

The sternwheel trade grew and expanded as the population increased. With the stampede to the Klondike goldfields in 1898 it



became economically feasible for private entrepreneurs to institute a run between Whitehorse and Dawson and Lake Bennett and Miles Canyon. The short distance between Miles Canyon and Whitehorse was too fast to be considered even for the miracle boat – sternwheeler. A tramway was contrived to aid the portage around Miles Canyon. The completion of the *White Pass and Yukon Railway* in 1900 connecting Skagway and Whitehorse eliminated the need for the tramway, effectively killed sternwheel traffic on the headwaters of the Yukon and got the entire town of Whitehorse switched to the opposite side of the river. (Originally established where the tramway ran – on the east side, the business area came to settle about the railway which was built along the west shore).

While the gold rush lasted and the population of Dawson rose to a staggering 30,000, sternwheel traffic between Dawson and Whitehorse became chaotic. Competition was fierce, passengers were often victimized by overzealous pursers and shipments of merchandise often arrived piecemeal to the frustration of local merchants. *White Pass and Yukon* officials determined that in order to avoid confusion and guarantee continuous passage, they must enter into the sternwheel trade themselves.

By 1900, sternwheelers were being constructed at Whitehorse and the *British Yukon Navigation Company* (an offshoot of the *White Pass and Yukon Co.*), was born. In a single season, the company was able to offer complete passage from Skagway to Dawson – using railway and steamer in an interlocking service.



Within a decade, the boom was over. Dawson's population fell to 8,512 – mining companies with their huge dredges replaced the individual miners and gold production went from a peak of \$12,113,000 in 1900 to \$2,820,000 in 1909.

But the sternwheeler was still needed. She remained the only vehicle capable of handling the unpredictable Yukon River and Dawson City relied on the supply runs of the *British Yukon Navigation Company*.

Then the revival – silver-lead ore was discovered at the Treadwell Mine and Keno Hill in 1919. The first S.S. Keno was built in 1922 specifically as an ore-carrier to handle the transshipment of ore from Keno Hill to Stewart. She was a small boat, length 130.5 feet; width 23.2 feet. The present ship is the result of "jumboizing" in 1937 when her freight capacity was expanded from 553 to 613 tons by means of lengthening the hull to 140.6 feet and her width to 30.4 feet. Her draught of under three feet had to be, and was – retained.

It was this necessity of restricting the draught that made the sternwheeler ill-suited as an ore-carrier. Excess tonnage would cause the ship to sink deeper into the water, so barges winched into the prow provided the best possible combination of low-draught, high tonnage freighters. Often the same length or longer than the boat that pushed it, the barges had a freight capacity of 700 tons. The combined length of sternwheeler and barge was too long to navigate the tight turns in the rivers so a "jackknife" technique was used. In this manoeuvre, the cable was slackened on one side and tightened on the other allowing the barge to drift into the current and around the bend. The cables were stabilized once barge and boat were together in the channel.

Sternwheelers, being low-powered, were often stymied by the current on the "up river" leg of a jaunt. On those occasions, it was time for "winching". In this technique, a wire cable was firmly secured above the fast water and the ship's winch was used to haul the boat inch by inch through the tricky stretch. On those undignified occasions when a ship ran aground

– it was time for the "grasshopper". A huge iron-shod spar was set into the water at about 80° and the ship was hoisted by block and tackle up the spar until she sat well out of the water. Then she was allowed to plunk down, her weight carrying her a few inches clear of the obstruction. This procedure was repeated until the ship was literally, pole-vaulted free.

It was gold that opened the Yukon but it was the sternwheeler that kept it alive, moving men and equipment, livestock and stockstuffs to the rapidly growing settlements at Dawson and Whitehorse, Mayo and Lake Bennett. Until the railway, it was only the riverboat that kept these settlements going.

S.S. Keno and S.S. Klondike are reminders of that bygone era. When restored, Keno will stand as a tribute to the importance of the sternwheelers in the development of the Yukon. *Klondike*, will be converted into a museum housing exhibits, artifacts and relics relative to the history of transportation in the Yukon and specifically the role played by the sternwheeler – a truly remarkable boat.

1 S.S. Kono Yukon River, Y.T. showing the forward winding apparatus. This is the equipment required for the "grasshopper" see text. Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

2 Steamer passing through Five Finger Rapid, Yukon. From Y.T. Looking back downstream the port side of the ship, the proximity of the sheer rock cliff is probably less than 20 feet from the hull – on either side. Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

3 Steamer Yukon pushing barge approaching Dawson City, Y.T. Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada



## The Soldier Of Louisbourg

by Victor Suthren, staff historian, *Fortress of Louisbourg, National Historic Park*  
Fortress Louisbourg rose on the shores of Cape Breton to answer the needs of a France concerned with its interests in North America. Nations of the 18th century turned to war as casually as to economic juggling in pursuit of their goals; in its fortifications as well as its trading houses, Louisbourg represented France's intention to be deficient in neither capacity. That territorial claims in North America were largely resolved by gunpowder as well as negotiation explained Louisbourg's grey ramparts.

The military and strategic nature of Louisbourg meant that, from the date of its establishment, military personnel and their attendant institutions and lifestyle would figure more prominently in town life than in most contemporary European centres of the 18th Century. In a way, this was typical of early settlements in Canada, where the dangers of Indian attacks and the requirements of defence schemes embracing a continent generally guaranteed a "garrison" flavour to Canadian settlements. For Louisbourg, intended as a watchdog post to protect the vital approaches to New France and menace the West-England colonies to the south, this "garrison town" character was an inevitable development.

As the stone, mortar and woodwork takes form on the modern project site, rearing again the skyline of the 18th century fortress, men and women charged with an equally important recreation task are attempting to understand the individual and collective lives which put the flush of life into rebuilt walls. Their tools are not only historical documents and archeological excavations but the loom, the needle, and the cobbler's hammer. In the same way as masons are restoring the buildings of Fortress Louisbourg, these people are rebuilding the everyday lives of its citizens.

From Louisbourg's close interdependence with the military garrison comes the need to examine a soldier's life. The historian is hampered in this by the lack of personal accounts, recollections and journals which might have revealed the weft and warp of such a life. Instead he must turn to official letters and documents, regulations and reports. From these dry glimpses of bureaucratic records he must fill in the daily scenes those records spring from.

The regular troops at Louisbourg were composed in the main of members of the *Troupes De La Marine*, or *Compagnies Franches De La Marine*, administered by the French Minister of the Marine and Colonies. Present with these were varying numbers of Swiss mercenary infantry; the regular establishment formed by these groups being backed, in theory at least, by a militia organization of the Louisbourg private citizenry. After 1765, these were augmented by four regular battalions of the regiments of Ariols, Burgoyne, Camille and the *Volontiers Étrangers*, all of whom were present during the final siege of 1758.

Members of these units while at Louisbourg lived in conditions modern military people would find unacceptable. The relative novelty of any established barracking

system in French 18th century military organization resulted in crowded, verminous, ill-provided and unhealthily living conditions. Sleeping arrangements of two men to a straw-mattressed bunk that leemed with vermin was the general case, prompting men to sleep anywhere else practicable, even the bastion ramparts. The insufficient blanket issue required men to sleep in their uniforms during the winter, and uniforms themselves deteriorated rapidly from lack of care, cleaning and replacement. Not surprisingly, the more ambitious or impatient soldier made use of his privilege of outside work to hire out as a labourer to townsmen, a step which largely offered the only chance of improving an otherwise miserable lot. With this privilege some men were able to amass possessions and a small purse quite in excess of anything possible in the purely military pursuit. Yet the isolation of Louisbourg and the grim conditions of barracks life led men to squander whatever earnings they periodically built up on drink and the dubious attractions of the town's brothels.

Often lacking a place to gather and carouse among themselves, soldiers sought out remote rooms at the town's tavern where they spent an inordinate amount of time drinking, smoking, and playing cards. At one point they took to gathering at the bakery in the basement of the barracks building, where they got in the way of harassed bakers working in the damp, poorly-lit chambers.

The tendency for the Louisbourg soldier to take his fun where he could find it sprang in no little part from the near-poverty his small pay earned him. While a labourer in the town could successfully haggle over a day's wage that might run to twenty or thirty *sois*, a private soldier might find his net daily whittled down by deductions and official parsimony to a pitiful one *sol*; a day and a half's work as an outside labourer could earn him the equivalent of a month's military pay.

Even were he able to obtain employment in the town, it did not guarantee that a soldier might escape from the round of casual debauchery which characterized so much of his off-duty activity. In this he varied very little from a stereotype into which so many men of life-time military service fell, and the more flamboyant or obvious efforts to seek out alcoholic oblivion served only to reinforce in the public mind a contempt which helped imprison the soldier in a life already heavily fettered.

One of the governors of Louisbourg hired two private soldiers to care for his garden, but was away on the morning the men arrived to work. The governor ordered a junior officer to supervise the work, but the latter did not arrive on the scene until about three o'clock in the afternoon. The soldiers had arrived at eight a.m. to begin work, and having found no one present to oversee them, wandered off to a tavern with three friends and downed a pint of spirits. A short and probably half-hearted return to the garden was quickly followed by a visit to another tavern, where they

imbibed until noon. An even shorter session at the gardening again was followed by a return to the tavern to buy a bottle, with some difficulties being encountered when the tavern keeper's wife refused to sell the bottle to the more drunken of the pair. His partner did succeed in mustering enough coherency to coax the bottle from the woman, however, and the two men managed to return to the garden. They had no problem disposing of the final bottle as they relaxed beside the garden pool and fell into what amounted to a sound sleep. While asleep, one of the men rolled or tumbled into the pool, where he drowned. At this juncture the junior officer arrived on the spot to see how work was progressing, but to witness instead a scene which was all too often seen in counterpart during the history of the Fortress.

The Louisbourg garrison was expected to service the incomplete and heterogeneous rampart artillery as well as serve as infantry. The dull tedium of sentry posting was endured at guardhouses, garreries, gates and storerooms, broken only by the long march of the *Ronde*, when the relief guard paraded circuitously from post to post about the town. For a price, men often stood duty in place of a comrade at work in the town. Men engaged in tavern work or a busy trade might in this manner avoid guard duty for years.

The issue uniform of grey coat, blue waistcoat, breeches and coarse woollen hose, black shoes and cocked hat soon faded under the stress of harsh living conditions and inadequate re-supply. The official yearly clothing issue for a private soldier included a new pair of breeches, two shirts, two socks, a hat, a pair of stockings, and two pairs of shoes; a coat or vest could be issued in alternate years. Very soon, the soldier came to find that the stated issue and the actual issue often varied, and much of his time was spent in patching and repairing the wardrobe. As much attention might be devoted to maintaining the soldier's accoutrements of cartridge box, hanger and bayonet, and the heavy, smoothbore flint-lock musket.



Conditions for the Louisbourg garrison were seldom more than tolerable; nonetheless official disregard and corruption during the winter of 1744 led the disgruntled soldiery to full-scale mutiny. Led by the Swiss, the garrison laid its grievances before the officers at bayonet point, and returned to order only when assurances had been given that their complaints would be looked into. The leaders of the mutiny were sought out and punished in France, but not before revealing in their final testimony the resentment nurtured by inadequate and maldistributed provision for their lives.

If all this seems strange in the face of what was a modest prosperity on the part of civilian Louisbourg, it should be recalled that the European enlisted soldier of the 18th Century was, by and large, a social pariah viewed with little esteem by the populace at large, his officers, and the King's administrators. That this would change with the advent of the North American and Napoleonic citizen-soldier did not detract from the reality that a soldier in Louisbourg, suffering in living and service conditions repellent even by the harsher standards of those days, did so largely with the public and official conviction that he in fact deserved little better.

The lone sentry atop the Barbette scans the cold and empty horizon. His handmade uniform is the prototype model of the *Compagnies Franches de La Marine*. A natural grey-white hand woven tunic covers waistcoat and breeches of heavy, woolen indigo blue. Socks are full length and hand knitted. Soon the tereplank of the Kings Bastion (seen snow-covered) will stage the manoeuvres of the Company performing 18th century drill and fatigue duty.